

Cp970.78
B15b

THE BATTLE OF GREAT BETHEL CHURCH
BAILEY

C970.78
P
B15b

THE BATTLE OF GREAT BETHEL CHURCH

By W.H.Bailey, Sr.

Blue & Gray
March, 1895

The Library
of the
University of North Carolina



Collection of North Caroliniana

Endowed by

John Sprunt Hill
of the Class of 1889

Cp 970.78-B15b

THE BATTLE OF GREAT BETHEL CHURCH—I.

W. H. BAILEY, SR., LL.D.

BEFORE proceeding with a sketch of this important—in more sense than one—battle, I wish to correct one or two errors which occur in an article by Colonel H. C. Graham, in your November issue, on "How North Carolina Went into the War." I was, when the war began, thirty years of age, a lawyer by profession, and then engaged in teaching a law school in conjunction with my father, at the foot of the Black Mountain, North Carolina. I was a secessionist, but not of the ultra school of Calhoun and Davis. I believed that a State had a right to secede, but only for such causes as would have justified a revolution in a consolidated government. This was the moral right, but whenever the people in convention, legally assembled, should have declared that there existed that just cause, contrary individual opinion must yield, and allegiance thereupon became only due to the seceding State. Colonel Graham states correctly that the proposition to call a convention merely to consider secession was voted down, but he leaves the impression that this action was taken before the secession of South Carolina. The truth of history demands that so important a result should not be left in doubt. The fact is, that a *plebiscite* of the kind stated by him was submitted to the voters not before, but after the secession of South Carolina, to wit, in February, 1861.

I addressed several assemblages of the people, advocating the holding of that kind of convention, but the scheme was voted down by several hundred majority. Later on the legislature called a convention peremptorily, and the ordinance of secession was passed on the 20th of May, 1861. Before, however, this ordinance was enacted, Governor Ellis had called for volunteers, and the 1st North Carolina Regiment was formed early in May, 1861. It was composed originally, at Raleigh, North Carolina, of ten companies:

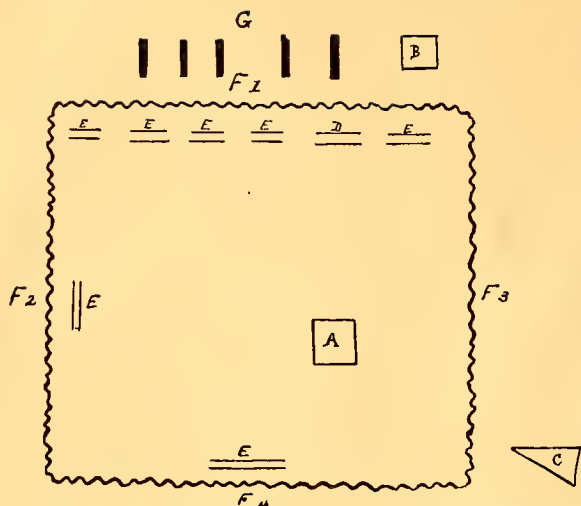
Company A—Edgecombe Guards, Captain Bridgers.
Company B—Hornet's Nest Riflemen, Captain Williams.
Company C—Charlotte Grays, Captain Ross.
Company D—Orange Guards, Captain Ashe.
Company E—Buncombe Riflemen, Captain McDowell.
Company F—Lafayette Light Infantry, Captain Starr.
Company G—Burke Rifles, Captain Avery.
Company H—Independent Light Infantry, Capt. Huske.

Company I—Enfield Rifles, Captain Parker.
Company K—Lincoln Stars, Captain Hoke.

Colonel Graham has stated the names of the field officers correctly. I name the companies from recollection, and may not be perfectly accurate. It may not be uninteresting to note the fate of these captains. Bridgers became a colonel, and is dead; Williams is alive; Ross (captain of what were called the Spring Chickens, and himself one) was killed in battle; Ashe lives in California; McDowell became a colonel; Starr became a colonel; Avery became a colonel, and was killed in battle; Huske is dead; Parker became a colonel, and was killed in battle; Hoke became a colonel, and was killed in battle. Many of the lieutenants and non-commissioned officers rose to high rank during the progress of the war. Lieutenant Lewis, of Company A, became a general; Saunders and Mallett, of Company D, became colonels; Lieutenant Gregory, of Company E, became a major; Lieutenant R. F. Hoke, of Company K, became, I believe, a lieutenant-general. In Company E, Sergeants Young and Patton became majors, and Private Fleming a colonel. Colonel Graham is entirely mistaken in stating that there was a Warren company in the regiment—the more our loss, as Warren contains the *crème de la crème* of North Carolina aristocracy. The companies came from the counties of Edgecombe, Mecklenburg, Orange, Buncombe, Cumberland, Burke, Halifax, and Lincoln. Either before we started or after reaching Yorktown two other companies were added—one from Halifax and the other from Perquimans.

At Yorktown General J. B. Magruder commanded, as he did at the battle of Great Bethel Church. In, as I recall the 9th of June, 1861, our regiment, a company of artillery, called the Richmond Howitzers, and a Virginia company of cavalry were marched to Great Bethel Church. There were two Bethel churches, not far apart—Great Bethel and Little Bethel. On arriving we were set to work throwing up breastworks.

The church was a wooden structure situated in a grove of large holly and hickory trees on a very slight acclivity. Here is a rough diagram presenting a view of the situation as seen on the 10th of June, 1861:



A—The church.
 B—The blacksmith shop.
 C—The cavalry.
 D—The howitzers.
 E—Our regiment.
 F—Breastworks.
 G—The direction of the attack.

The breastworks F2 and F3 were little, if any, higher than a man's knee. F4 was to the breast, and F1—the point of attack—about a yard high. The battle commenced at nine o'clock A. M. on a bright morning—June 10th. General Hill stated in his report that it lasted five and a half hours. My impression is that it ended about noon. I apprehend that our force, all told, did not exceed thirteen, possibly fourteen hundred. General—then Colonel—Hill, in his report (*Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, Volume I, page 342) says that “this [our] small force was engaged for five and a half hours with four and a half regiments of the enemy. * * The enemy made three distinct and well-sustained charges, but were repulsed with heavy loss.” These charges were made on breastwork F1. Captain Winthrop, a gallant officer, led the charges. The Federal troops sprang on to the breastworks, received a shower of shot-musketry, twice fell back. At the third charge Winthrop sprang on the breastwork, waved his sword, exclaiming: “Rally, boys, rally! one more rally and the day is ours!” The brave words had scarcely been ut-

tered when poor Winthrop fell, mortally wounded. This caused first, confusion, then a panic, and finally a complete rout for miles.

Whilst this was going on, the howitzers—as brave a body of men as ever wore a uniform—were handling their guns, poor howitzers, with the utmost coolness and skill. It looked more as if they were practising before their sweethearts. A blacksmith shop (B) was directly within the range of their guns, and General Magruder stated that he would not order any one to go outside to fire the shop, as the chances were all against succeeding, yet if any one desired to volunteer to do so he would accept his services. Several privates sprang from the ranks to offer themselves, but Wyatt got in advance and was chosen. We know his sad fate—riddled with bullets even before he reached the shop.

We all had an (to me at least) unexpectedly good lunch that day from the canteens and haversacks dashed down by the rapidly flying Federals. Wyatt was our only loss. The Federals lost between five hundred and a thousand men. It was said that Winthrop was killed by the negro cook attached to the Orange Guard.

Yet, a battle so fought and won against such odds is termed by Butler, in his “Book,” “an affair”! and Davis only devotes a page to it.

The moral effect of the battle was electrical. It stimulated the weak-kneed, encouraged the pessimists, and doubtless operated as an unseen but no less powerful factor in the battle of Bull Run, which happened forty days afterward. The logic of it was that one Southerner was equal to four Federals, but the proportion ran much higher in the average Southern mind. Philosophically viewed, it turned out to be a misleading star of destiny, as it remotely but certainly became the cause of a fearful destruction of human life, commencing with Bull Run and lasting through nearly four sad years. As a just tribute to our regiment, the legislature gave us the *nom de plume* of the “Bethel Regiment.”

II.—EXTRACTS FROM GENERAL D. H. HILL'S OFFICIAL REPORT OF THE BATTLE.

SIR:—I have the honor to report that, in obedience to orders from the colonel commanding, I marched, on the 6th instant, with my regiment and four pieces of Major Randolph's battery, from Yorktown, on the Hampton Road, to Bethel Church, nine miles from Hampton.

We reached there after dark on a wet night, and slept without tents. Early on the morning of the 7th, I made a reconnoissance of the ground preparatory to fortifying. I found a branch of Back River in our front and encircling our right flank. On our left was a dense and

* From *Charleston Daily Courier* of June 26, 1861. Addressed to Governor J. W. Ellis.

almost impassable wood, except about one hundred and fifty yards of old field. The breadth of the road, a thick wood, and a narrow cultivated field covered our rear. The nature of ground determined me to make an enclosed work, and I had the invaluable aid of Lieutenant-Colonel Lee, of my regiment, in its plan and construction. Our position had the inherent defect of being commanded by an immense field immediately in front of it, upon which the masses of the enemy might be readily deployed. Presuming an attempt would be made to carry the bridge across the stream, a battery was made for its especial protection, and Major Randolph placed his guns so as to sweep all the approaches to it. The occupation of two commanding eminences beyond the creek and on our right would have greatly strengthened our position, but our force was too weak to admit of the occupation of more than one of them. A battery was laid out on it for one of Randolph's howitzers.

We had only twenty-five spades, six axes, and three picks, but these were busily plied all day and night of the 7th, and all day on the 8th. * * *

On Sunday, the 9th, a fresh supply of tools enabled us to put more men to work, and when not engaged in religious duties the men worked vigorously on the intrenchments. We were aroused at three o'clock on Monday morning for a general advance upon the enemy, and marched three and a half miles, when we learned that the foe, in large force, was within a few hundred yards of us. We fell back hastily upon our intrenchments. Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, of the 3d Virginia Regiment, having joined us with some one hundred and eighty men, was stationed on the hill on the extreme right beyond the creek, and Company G of my regiment was also thrown over the stream to protect the howitzer under Captain Brown. Captain Bridgers, of Company A, 1st North Carolina Regiment, took post in the dense wood beyond and to the left of the bridge. Major Montague, with three companies of his battalion, was ordered up from the rear and took post on our right, beginning at the church and extending along the entire front on that side. This fine body of men and the gallant command of Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart worked with great rapidity, and in an hour had constructed temporary shelters against the enemy's fire. Just at nine o'clock A. M. the heavy columns of the enemy were seen approaching rapidly and in

good order, but when Randolph opened upon them at a quarter past nine their organization was completely broken up. The enemy replied promptly with his artillery, firing briskly and wildly, and made an attempt at deployment on our right of the road, under cover of some houses and a paling.

They were, however, promptly driven back by our artillery, a Virginia company (the Life Guard), and Companies B, C, and G of my regiment. The enemy made no deployment within musketry range during the day, except under cover of woods, fences, or paling. Under cover of the trees he moved a strong column to an old ford about three-quarters of a mile below where I had placed a picket of some forty men. Colonel Magruder sent Captain Worth's company, of Montague's command, with one howitzer under Sergeant Crane, to drive back this column, which was done by a single shot from the howitzer. Before this, a priming wire had been broken in the vent of the howitzer commanded by Captain Brown and rendered it useless. A force, estimated at fifteen hundred, was now attempting to outflank us and get in the rear of Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart's small command. He was accordingly directed to fall back, and the whole of our advance troops were withdrawn. At this critical moment I directed Lieutenant-Colonel Lee to call Captain Bridgers out of the swamp and order him to occupy the nearest advanced work, and I ordered Captain Ross's Company C, 1st Regiment, North Carolina Volunteers, to the support of Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart. These two captains, with their companies, crossed over to Randolph's battery under a most heavy fire, in the most gallant manner.

As Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart had withdrawn, Captain Ross was detained at the church near Randolph's battery. Captain Bridgers, however, crossed over, and drove the Zouaves out of the advanced howitzer battery and re-occupied it. It is impossible to over-estimate this service. It decided the action in our favor. In obedience to orders from Colonel Magruder, Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart rushed back, and in spite of the presence of a foe ten times his superior in numbers, resumed in the most heroic manner possession of his intrenchments. A fresh howitzer was carried across and placed in the battery, and Captain Avery, of Company G, was directed to defend it at all hazards. We were now as secure as at the beginning of the fight, and as yet had no man killed. The ene-

my, finding himself foiled on our right flank, next made his final demonstration on our left. A strong column, supposed to consist of volunteers from different regiments, and under command of Captain Winthrop, aid-de-camp to General Butler, crossed over the creek and appeared at the angle on our left. Those in advance had put on our distinctive badge of a white band around the cap, and they cried out repeatedly, "Don't fire!" This ruse was practised to enable the whole column to get over the creek and form in good order. They now began to cheer most lustily, thinking that our work was open at the gorge and that they could get in by a sudden rush. Companies B and C, however, soon dispelled the illusion by a cool, deliberate, and well-directed fire. Colonel Magruder sent over portions of G, C, and N Companies of my regiment to our support. And now began as cool firing on our side as was ever witnessed.

The three field officers of the regiment were present, and but few shots were fired without their permission, the men repeatedly saying, "May I fire? I think I can bring him." They were all in high glee and seemed to enjoy it as much as boys do rabbit shooting. Captain Winthrop, while most gallantly urging on his men, was shot through the heart, when all rushed back with the utmost precipitation. The fight at the angle lasted but twenty minutes; it completely discouraged the enemy and he made no further effort at assault. The house in front, which had served as a hiding-place for the enemy, was now fired by a shell from a howitzer, and the out-houses and paling were soon in a blaze. As all shelter was now taken from him, the enemy called in his troops and started back for Hampton. As he had left sharp-shooters behind him in the woods on our left, the dragoons could not advance until Captain Hoke, of Com-

pany K, 1st Regiment, North Carolina Volunteers, had thoroughly explored them. When he gave assurance of the wood being clear, Captain Douthatt, with some one hundred dragoons, pursued. * * *

There were not quite eight hundred of my regiment engaged in the fight, and not one-half of these drew a trigger during the fight. All remained manfully at the post assigned, and not a man in the regiment behaved badly. The companies not engaged were as much exposed and rendered equal service with those participating in the fight. They deserve equally the thanks of the country. In fact, it is the most trying ordeal to which soldiers can be subjected to receive a fire which their orders forbid them to return. Had a single company left its post, our works would have been exposed, and the constancy and discipline of the unengaged companies cannot be too highly commended.

A detachment of fifteen cadets from North Carolina Military Institute defended the howitzer under Lieutenant Hudnal, and acted with great coolness and determination. * * *

Permit me, in conclusion, to pay a well-deserved compliment to the 1st Regiment, North Carolina Volunteers. Their patience under trial, perseverance under toil, and courage under fire have seldom been surpassed by veteran troops. After working night and day, and sometimes without tents and cooking utensils, a murmur has never escaped them to my knowledge. They have done a large portion of the work on the intrenchments at Yorktown, as well as those at Bethel. Had all the regiments in the field worked with the same spirit there would not be an assailable point in Virginia. After the battle they shook hands affectionately with the spades, calling them clever fellows and good friends.



UNIVERSITY OF N.C. AT CHAPEL HILL



00032769914

FOR USE ONLY IN

THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION

